

Thoughts on Montreal Relay

By Henry Jackson

My Introduction to Montreal Relay

- When playing with Tom Hassett for the first time in Anderson, he asked if I played Montreal Relay.
- When I asked “What’s that?”, he said “we’re going to play it. It’s easy.”
- He was right.

Tom Hassett's Method

If I open 1♣ say “may be short” and bid:

- 1♦ if you have no 5-card major
- A Major with 5+
- 1NT (6-9), 2NT(10-12), 3NT(13-15) with a balanced hand with no 4-card major
- 2♣ or 2♦ with 5+

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- Then he added “jump in the suit to show opening count so I know we have game”!

Lot's of Versions

- An Internet search revealed several ways to play this convention.
- Most did not come close to the way it is used in NKBC.
- Even the one that came closest would seem somewhat foreign here.
- It becomes Montreal Relay only when Responder bids 1♦ to deny a 5-card major.

North opens 1♣ which denies a 5-card Major and does not have sufficient values or too many values to open No Trump.

South responds 1♦ which denies a 5-card Major suit. Artificial and alertable. The responder promises only sufficient values to respond.

Openers Responses are:

- 1♥ Promises a 4-card Heart suit. A 5-card Heart suit would have been opened with 1 Heart.
- 1♠ Promises a 4-card Spade suit. A 5-card Spade suit would have been opened with 1 Spade.
- 1NT Promises a holding with no 4-card Major suit, opening values, and no 6-card Club suit. Possible distribution: 3-3-4-3, 3-2-4-4, 3-2-3-5, etc.
- 2♣ Promises at least a 6-card Club suit since the opening of 1 Club could have been systemically made with a 2-card Club suit.
- 2♦ Promises reversing values of 15/16 plus high card points with a minimum of 5 Clubs and 4 Diamonds distribution.
- 2♥ Promises reversing values of 15/16 plus high card points with a minimum of 5 Clubs and 4 Hearts distribution.
- 2♠ Promises reversing values of 15/16 plus high card points with a minimum of 5 Clubs and 4 Spades distribution.
- 2NT Promises values of 17/18-19 high card points with no 4-card Major suit and balanced distribution. A normal No Trump opening with 15-17 high card points would have been opened with 1 No Trump, not 1 Club.
- 3♦ A Splinter bid showing a singleton or void in Diamonds.
- 3♥ A Splinter bid showing a singleton or void in Hearts.
- 3♠ A Splinter bid showing a singleton or void in Spades.

“May Be Short” or Alert?

1♣: Alert if playing Montreal Relay, Kennedy Method, or similar system AND partner is expected to respond (“forcing”). Partner should state something like “Could be as short as 1 or 0 clubs, promises only opening values, and I’m expected to make a response.” Announce “could be short” if responder could pass with a hand as bad as xxx, Qxxx, xxxx, xx. (When quizzing players who use the Montreal Relay system you’ll find that many of them really do consider the bid to be forcing except in the rare case where they hold practically a bust hand with long clubs. You’ll find that many of them will respond 1♦ with the example hand above. That in itself should make the 1♣ be considered artificial and forcing. In this case the opponents are due an Alert, not an Announcement.)

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The Dilemma

(When quizzing players who use the Montreal Relay system you'll find that **many of them really do consider the bid to be forcing** except in the rare case where they hold practically **a bust hand with long clubs**. You'll find that many of them will respond 1♦ with the example hand above. That in itself should make the 1♣ be considered artificial and forcing. In this case the opponents are due an **Alert**, not an **Announcement**.)

John Taylor and I Alert 1C Openings

- We alert 1♣ openings and if asked explain that shows normal opening values and partner is expected to respond.
- I can respond 1♦ with xxx, Qxxx, xxxx, xx.
- We have had success using Montreal Relay along with both strong and weak NT openings.
- This approach seems safer in tournaments.

Defending Against Montreal Relay

- Overcall when possible to prevent easy exchange of information – They can't bid 1♦ if you have already bid it or something higher!
- Use natural 2♣ overcalls (must be alerted unless the 1♣ bid was alerted)
- Use natural 2♦ overcalls over the 1♦ response (no alert required)

4 or 5?

- You open 1♣ (playing Montreal Relay)
- Left-hand opponent overcalls 1♦
- Partner bids 1♥
- How many cards did he promise?
- What if Left-hand opponent had doubled instead of overcalling?
- Did use of Montreal Relay change anything?
- Have you discussed this with partners?

A MODIFIED MONTREAL RELAY

The One Club Opening Bid



This bid is the cornerstone of the Montreal Relay bidding system. It is artificial and also *Semi-Forcing*. It may be as short as a singleton, much like the *Precision* bid of 1♣, but unlike that system it can sometimes be passed. The point-count is generally 11-17 points, and denies holding a 5-card major.

Alert! My partner's 1♣ opening bid may be a singleton and is semi-forcing

The big difference is that when the opening bid is 1♣ responder must have at least a 5-card suit to bid a major. There are other refinements, too.

- **A major suit response must have a 5-card suit**
- **A notrump response must have at least 11 points**
- **A 1♦ response is artificial and denies the above. May have no points**
- **A jump response in any suit shows 8-10 HCP and at least a 6-card suit**
- **A double jump response in either major shows 5-5 in hearts and spades**

There are several advantages to using this treatment, the first of which is that responder knows that an opening bid of 1♦ must be at least a 5-card suit. The second is even more important, though, and that's the primary reason for playing the Montreal Relay - The team can often play in a 4-4 major suit fit at a low level with the strong hand as declarer. And that's a huge advantage! A third reason is that opener knows that responder has a 5-card major immediately after the first response. Responder doesn't have to bid a suit more than once to show five.

When responder does not have a 5-card major, he must bid an artificial 1♦ to tell his partner about his lack of major suit length. The response is alertable for two reasons - first, of course, is the fact that's it's artificial and may not be a diamond suit, and second because not only does it deny holding a 5-card major, but could have zero points. Responder is not obligated to bid again, however.

If responder has a 4-card major, he first bids 1♦ to deny five, and also allow opener to name a 4-card major. Responder can pass, raise or bid a new suit. Since the opener will often become declarer in a 4-4 fit this is one of the benefits of the system.

Semi-Forcing

What does semi-forcing mean? It means you are allowed to pass with some hands but must respond 1♦ without those particular hands. Suppose your partner opens 1♣ and you have either of these two hands...

♠ 7 2
♥ 8 3 2
♦ T 9 7
♣ 9 7 5 4 2

♠ 9 7 5 4 2
♥ 8 3 2
♦ T 9 7
♣ 7 2

It's pretty easy to pass with the first hand, right? Yes, your partner might have a singleton but passing is certainly the right call with that hand. Unlike the *Precision Club System* the Montreal opening club bid is not entirely forcing. But if you reverse the clubs and spades it doesn't look nearly so attractive to pass. That's why 1♣ is semi-forcing. If spades and clubs are switched, just place the 1♠ card on the table as if you didn't have a care in the world and pass your partner's next bid. Any contract at all has to be better than playing in clubs when you have a weak hand and are short in that suit.

Here's another hand where you cannot pass, but you don't have a 5-card major, either. Respond 1♦ and pass your partner's next call. Fortunately you seldom have hands as bad as these!

♠ T 8 7
♥ 9 5 4
♦ 7 6 4 2
♣ 8 4 2

Declarer Plays Many of the 4-4 Fits

Here's an example where the Montreal Relay again has an advantage...

Your partner opens 1♣ and after your response of 1♦ he rebids 1♠, showing a 4-card suit. You have enough to raise to 2♠ and the final contract will depend on your partner, but most importantly, your partner will be the declarer.

♠ K T 9 3
♥ T 5
♦ A 8 5 4
♣ Q 7 3

Since your partner is the declarer instead of you, the stronger of your two hands will be hidden. That has to be an advantage during the play. Your partner will also have the opening lead come up to him, rather than through his hand, which is a second advantage. Sometimes a favorable outcome can depend on little things such as this.

Jump Responses

Most players today use a jump shift to show a weak hand with fewer than 6 points, but we use the bid to show 8-10 points with a good 6-card suit. Hands with 8-10 points occur much more frequently than either very weak hands or very strong hands, so we get to use this bid often. Sometimes it leads to a good 3NT contract and is almost never in danger of being doubled.

A single jump in either clubs or a new suit is 8-10 HCP with a 6-card suit

We also use the double jump to show 5-5 in the major suits after either a 1♣ or a 1♦ opening bid. Bidding 3♥ shows invitational values while the 3♠ call is forcing.

A double jump in either hearts or spades shows 5-5 in the majors

Opener's Rebids

Jump to 2NT Rebid

A problem hand for any bidding system is the one with 4-4-4-1 pattern and more than 17 points. There are proposed solutions but they often have unacceptable limitations. Even so, something is needed. Here is a method you might consider... Open 1♣ and if your partner responds with a 5-card major and you happen to have four more, you have found a great hand. If your partner's 5-card major is your short suit you can jump to 2NT showing 18+ points and no fit. Your partner won't need much to bid game.

If your partner bids 1♦ in response to your opening bid, denying a 5-card major, he may still have a 4-card major. Jump to 2NT to tell your partner the size and pattern of your hand. If your partner has at least 6 points he should bid a 4-card major since you have at least one major. Without a 4-card major your partner should show his best minor.

Minor Suit Rebid

When the opener bids 1♣ and then rebids 2♣ over a 1♦ response, he denies a 4-card major and also denies any ability to rebid 1NT. Opener should have at least a 5-card club suit with

distributional values.

If opener's rebid is 2♦ it gets a bit complicated... Yes, it does show 5-card diamond suit, but there are inferences to be drawn. Why didn't he simply open 1♦? This is our agreement: Opener has a reverse with five clubs and four diamonds and about 16-18 points with an interest in slam. He does not have a 4-4-4-1 hand nor 5-5 in the minors. Therefore he specifically has 3-2 in the majors.

Jump Shift Rebid

Some strong two-suited hands are very difficult to describe so let's fall back on an old standard - Open one of them and then jump in the other one. Generally your first bid suit is the better of the two suits. If you can suggest a better way, please send me an email.

(See the page on [5-5 in the Minors](#))

Reverse Rebid

A Reverse is a nonjump bid at the two-level in a new suit that ranks higher than the first bid suit. From the early days bridge the point count is defined as 16-18, but the Montreal Relay system outlined here generally has an upper of 17 points, so our Reverse is a very good 15 to 17 points.

Alert or “Could Be Short”

The issue of whether or not an alert is required relates to whether the bid is considered forcing or non-forcing per partnership agreement and understanding.

1♣: Alert if playing Precision where the bid is “strong, artificial, and forcing with 16 or more HCP and says nothing about clubs” (or similar agreement).

1♣: Alert if playing Montreal Relay, Kennedy Method, or similar system AND partner is expected to respond (“forcing”). Partner should state something like “Could be as short as 1 or 0 clubs, promises only opening values, and I’m expected to make a response.” Announce “could be short” if responder could pass with a hand as bad as xxx, Qxxx, xxxx, xx. (When quizzing players who use the Montreal Relay system you’ll find that many of them really do consider the bid to be forcing except in the rare case where they hold practically a bust hand with long clubs. You’ll find that many of them will respond 1♦ with the example hand above. That in itself should make the 1♣ be considered artificial and forcing. In this case the opponents are due an Alert, not an Announcement.)

1♣/1♦: Alert if playing Montreal Relay or similar system where these two bids distinguish the size of the opening hand. For instance, 1♣ shows a hand with no five card major and a range of 10-13 HCP, and 1♦ shows the very same hand but with 14 or more HCP. In each of these cases players may have zero cards in the minor suit bid and hold five or more cards in the unbid minor suit. Again, when quizzing players who play these systems you’ll find that most will scrape together any bid possible (by implication, “forcing”) for fear that opener may actually be void in the first suit bid.

1♣/1♦: Announce “may be short” if they could be shorter than three cards and are 100% non-forcing.